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Religious Liberty

IN THE

Sixteenth Century.

BY

Rev. HENRY S. BURRAGE, D. D.

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RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

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SIXTEENTH CENTURY.

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RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

IN THE

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LUTHER AT WORMS.

Never was Luther a grander figure than at the Diet of Worms. He was in the presence of the highest dignitaries in Church and State, and all Germany was listening to hear what the poor monk would say. When asked if he would defend the books he had written, or recant some part, he quoted in reply the words of Christ: "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why smitest thou me?" When farther pressed for an answer, he added: "Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies from the Bible, or by clear arguments, I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything

against the conscience." And he closed the memorable interview with the heroic words: "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen!"

A NEW VOICE IN CHRISTENDOM.

This ringing assertion of the rights of conscience, and the equally ringing defiance of civil authority in matters of religious belief, in 1521, was a new voice in Christendom. Since the union of Church and State under Constantine the Great there had been no such thing as religious liberty. In all these centuries every departure from Catholic orthodoxy was regarded as a crime, punishable both by the ecclesiastical and civil authorities. The Church, it is true, claimed not to thirst for blood, but it excommunicated the condemned heretic and handed him over to the State for torture and death. It was a monstrous wrong, and Luther saw it and denounced it. From 1517 to 1523, he gave expression to many noble sentiments in favor of religious liberty. "No one," he said, "can command or ought to command the soul, except God, who alone can show it the way to heaven. It is futile and impossible to command, or by force to compel, any man's belief. Heresy is a spiritual thing which no iron can hew down, no fire burn, no water drown." [1]

[1] Luther's tract, "Von Weltlichen Obrigkeit."

In his "Exposition of the First Epistle of Peter," commenting on the words "Fear God. Honor the king," Luther said: "If the civil magistrate interferes with spiritual matters of conscience, in which God alone must rule, we ought not to obey at all, but rather lose our head. Civil government is confined to external and temporal affairs. . . . If an emperor or prince asks me about my faith, I would give answer, not because of his command, but because of my duty to confess my faith before everybody. But if he should go farther, and command me to believe this or that, I would say: 'Dear sir, mind your secular business. You have no right to interfere with God's reign, and therefore I shall not obey you at all.'"

THE VOICE HUSHED.

These are noble utterances fearlessly spoken. But Luther's voice protesting against coercion in matters of conscience was suddenly hushed on the appearance of the Anabaptists. To him they threatened disorder and anarchy, and abandoning the noble position he had taken in behalf of religious liberty, he welcomed the strong arm of the civil power in seeking their suppression. At first he sought only their banishment, and disapproved of the cruelty with which the Anabaptists everywhere were assailed. As late as 1528, he said: "It is not right,

and I deeply regret that such wretched people should be so miserably murdered, burned and cruelly put to death. Every one should be allowed to believe what he pleases. If he believes wrongly, he will have punishment enough in the eternal fire of hell. Why should he be tortured in this life also?"[1] In the same year, he wrote to a friend: "I can in no way admit that false teachers should be put to death; it is enough that they should be banished." But Luther grew more and more intolerant. Although it is claimed by some that he never went so far as to sanction the extreme penalty in the case of heretics unless they were rebels against the State authority, yet in 1540, or 1541, to the simple question whether one should put the Anabaptists to death with the sword, he made answer, "Placet mihi, Martino Luthero."

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[1] Von der Wiedertaufe, an zwei Pfarrherrn.

[2] Luther justified this action by the following added words: "Wiewol es crudele anzusehen, dass man sie mit dem Schwert straft, so ist doch crudelius, dass sie ministerium verbi damniren und keine gewisse Lehre treiben, und rechte Lehre unterdrücken, und dazu regna mundi zerstören wollen" Dr. Schaff, in his forthcoming Vol. VII. of his Church History, pp. 501-2, referring to these words of Luther, says: "If we put a strict construction on this sentence Luther must be counted with the advocates of the death penalty for heresy. But he made a distinction between two classes of Anabaptists—those who were seditious or revolutionary, and those who were mere fanatics. The former should be put to death, the latter should be banished. In a letter to Philip of Hesse, dated November 20, 1538, he urgently requested him to expel the Anabaptists, whom he characterized as children of the devil, from his territory, but says nothing of the sword. We should give him, therefore, the benefit of a liberal construction."

I hesitate to differ with a writer of so much candor and such good judgment as Dr. Schaff, who is supported in his view by Dr. Köstlin, the learned biographer

Melanchthon, Zwingli and Calvin were even more intolerant. Calvin consented to the condemnation and death of Servetus, while the gentle Melanchthon not only commended him for this act, but afterward referred to it as "a pious and memorable example to all posterity." Zwingli was even more relentless; and he is well represented in the statue erected at Zürich, in 1885, as holding a Bible in his right hand and a sword in his left hand. An imperial edict enacted by the Diet at Spier, April 23, 1529, decreed that every Anabaptist and rebaptized person, of whatever age or sex, should be put to death by sword, or fire, or otherwise. Indeed, no scenes of torture and death had been witnessed since the early days of the Christian Church, which for refinement of cruelty could be compared with those in which the Anabaptists of the period of the Reformation had so prominent a part—a part at once so fraught with gratitude and instruction.

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of Luther. But what are the facts? Luther was not asked if the "seditious or revolutionary" Anabaptists should be put to death. Nor did Luther in his answer make the distinction which Dr. Schaff now makes. If he had in mind any such distinction, it hardly seems possible that he should not have given expression to it in this connection. Furthermore, the date to which this document is assigned, 1540 or 1541, brings us near to the close of Luther's life (1546); and as Luther, according to Dr. Schaff, became more and more intolerant with advancing years, it seems a fair inference from Luther's words that he was now in agreement with his brethren as to the death penalty in the case of the Anabaptists, believing, as he says, that while it was cruel to punish them by the sword, it was more cruel that they should denounce the ministry of the word and suppress the true doctrine, and so overthrow the kingdoms of the world.

ANABAPTIST PLEA FOR LIBERTY.

In the new era then opening, therefore, was there to be no return to the primitive principle of religious liberty? About the same time that Luther published his "Exposition of the First Epistle of Peter," Balthasar Hubmeier published at Schafthausen, in Switzerland, a tract "Concerning Heretics and Those Who Burn Them." "The burning of heretics," said Hubmeier, "cannot be justified by the Scriptures. Christ himself teaches that the tares should be allowed to grow with the wheat. He did not come to burn, or murder, but to give life, and that too, more abundantly. We should, therefore, pray and hope for improvement in men as long as they live. If they cannot be convinced by appeals to reason, or to the Word of God, they should be let alone. One cannot be made to see his errors either by fire or sword. But if it is a crime to burn those who scornfully reject the gospel of Jesus Christ, how much more is it a crime to burn the true expounders and exemplars of the Word of God. Such an apparent zeal for God, the welfare of souls, and the honor of the Church, is a deception. Indeed to every one it must be evident that the burning of heretics is a device of Satan."

In his plea for religious liberty Hubmeier included even Turks and atheists, willing to grant to all others the

same rights of conscience that he asked for himself. From this advanced position he never retreated. After he separated from Luther and Zwingli, and became the trusted leader of the Anabaptists, his voice still rang out strong and clear in behalf of soul liberty, and it ceased not until his martyrdom, in 1528.

But he was only one of a mighty host. The Anabaptists had a multitude of voices in cities and towns, in villages and hamlets, on the highways and in the byways, wherever the bearer of glad tidings could carry his message, proclaiming religious liberty—the right of every man to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience. In matters of faith, they said, the civil power has nothing to do. Men should be allowed to keep their consciences unfettered, and have liberty to teach and to organize, on the scriptural plan, churches that control their own affairs independent of the State. As citizens, they were ready to render obedience to the civil magistrate in all things not in conflict with the Word of God. The excesses practiced at Münster do not invalidate this declaration. This is admitted by all who have studied impartially the Anabaptist movement. Cornelius, the learned author of "Der Münsterische Aufruhr," says: "All these excesses were condemned and opposed whenever a large assembly of the brethren

afforded an opportunity to give expression to the religious consciousness of the Baptist membership." The testimony of Dr. Ludwig Keller, archivist at Münster, is of the same import.

But how came the Anabaptists by this principle of soul liberty? They found it where Luther found it, in the Word of God. It was one of the results of their study of the New Testament. Egli's testimony is in point here: "The principles from which the Anabaptists proceeded," he says, "manifest a powerful grasp of original Christian ideas,[1] that is, ideas belonging to primitive Christianity as set forth in the Scriptures." The Anabaptist movement commenced in Switzerland. Its leaders were the friends and associates of Zwingli, and for a while they stood at his side in his conflict with Rome. Zwingli's principle, which proved so effective in his discussion with his Roman Catholic opponents, namely, that the Word of God is the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice, they stoutly maintained and consistently applied. The old order of things was passing away. What should take its place but the primitive order as disclosed in the New Testament? In their study of the Scriptures they discovered that religion is a personal matter. It brings a man into relations with

[1] Die Zuricher Wiedertaufer zur Reformationszeit. s. 94.

God, and makes him responsible to God. No ruler, no priest, may stand between him and his Maker. He must repent for himself, and he must believe for himself. Here is the foundation of the doctrine of soul liberty, the right of every man to examine for himself the Word of God, and to act upon his own conscientious views of duty derived from that Word. These men also discovered that the churches described in the New Testament were composed of believers in Christ, and not of believers and unbelievers, as in the Roman Catholic Church and in the new State Church. There could be no such thing as the subserviency of a Christian Church to the civil authority. Christ alone is king in Zion, they said. And so from Zwingli's principle of the supreme authority of the Scriptures, the Anabaptists advanced to the added principles of the supreme lordship of Christ, the necessity of a regenerate church membership, and the entire separation of Church and State.

ANABAPTISTS IN THE LOW COUNTRIES.

But while so many of the Anabaptists of Switzerland and Germany were either put to death or driven into exile, the brethren of the Netherlands secured a stronger foothold. The Anabaptist movement in the Low Countries doubtless had its origin in the movement in Switzerland and Ger-

many. It was later in its development; its doctrinal teachings were similar to those of the Anabaptists in German-speaking lands, and the Dutch martyrologies include the German and Swiss Anabaptists; and there are other indications of an intimate connection between these scattered members of the Anabaptist brotherhood. The Dutch Anabaptists, like the Swiss and German Anabaptists, moreover, were the strenuous advocates of religious liberty. They suffered persecution as did their brethren in other lands. Indeed, the history of the Netherlands during this period was written in blood. Under Charles V., more than fifty thousand persons, mostly Anabaptists, were hanged, beheaded or burned alive. "The knell of death sounded heavily from every belfry."

In 1533, the Queen Dowager of Hungary, sister of the emperor, wrote to her brother, that "In her opinion all heretics, whether repentant or not, should be persecuted with such severity as that error might at once be extinguished, care only being taken that the provinces were not entirely depopulated." Two years later an edict was issued at Brussels, condemning all heretics to death, repentant males to be executed with the sword, repentant females to be buried alive, the obstinate of both sexes to be burned. This edict was

the law of the land for twenty years, and it was rigidly enforced.[1] Ten Kate says the Anabaptists in the Netherlands furnished ten martyrs where the other reformed bodies furnished one. In 1550, the leading religious reform element in the land was Baptist. In Friesland, in 1586, one inhabitant in every four was an Anabaptist.

WILLIAM OF ORANGE AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY.

Deliverance for the Netherland Anabaptists came from an unexpected quarter. Prince William of Orange, in Paris, in 1559, was made acquainted with the secret understanding existing between Henry II., of France, and Philip II., of Spain, for the extermination of the Protestants of the Low Countries. The story came to William from the lips of Henry himself. Horror stricken and indignant at the revelations of the king, he nevertheless held his peace, and so earned the surname, "the Silent," by which he has since been known. He was then only twenty-six years of age, and although he was not at that time in sympathy with the reformers, he resolved to take the side of the threatened Protestants and save them if he could.

As early as the close of 1566, he published a pamph-

[1] Motley's Rise of the Dutch Republic, 1, 80.

let, in which he urged the necessity of allowing some degree of religious liberty. In the progress of the struggle Prince William soon exhausted his own means. August 31, 1568, he summoned the people of the Netherlands to his assistance. His need was money, and he desired contributions from the rich out of their abundance, and from the poor out of their poverty. The appeal met with only a feeble response from those who were the best supplied with the sinews of war. But a poor Anabaptist preacher collected a small sum from his congregation, and at the risk of his life brought it to the prince's camp. It came from a people, he said, whose will was better than the gift. They asked to be repaid only by kindness when the cause of reform in the Netherlands should be triumphant. The prince signed the receipt for the money, and expressed himself as touched by the sympathy of these persecuted outcasts. "In the course of time," says Motley, "other contributions from similar sources, principally collected by dissenting preachers, starving and persecuted church communities, were received. The poverty-stricken exiles," he adds, "contributed far more in proportion for the establishment of civil and religious liberty than the wealthy merchants, or the haughty nobles."[1] Wil-

[1] Rise of the Dutch Republic, 2, 250, 251.

liam of Orange never forgot the aid thus received. More and more he espoused the cause of the persecuted Anabaptists. Religious liberty for his people, whatever their faith, was now his chief aim. Shortly after, he issued the following order: "Be it known to the magistrates and the officials in the North, that you are by no means to allow any one who preaches and observes the true Word of God, according to the gospel, to be hindered, injured, or disturbed, or to have his conscience examined, or on that account to be persecuted by inquisition or placards."

In the summer of 1572, the Estates of Holland recognized the Prince of Orange as the king's lawful stadtholder, and he in turn insisted on the freedom of religion. "Everybody," he said, "shall exercise it freely, in private or in public, in church or in chapel, without let or hindrance from any one." In 1577, when wise statesmen of his own party were unwilling to adopt the principle of toleration, he refused to exclude from the rights of citizenship the Anabaptists of Holland. "The affair of the Anabaptists," wrote St. Aldegonde, "has been removed. The prince objects to exclude them from citizenship. He answered me sharply, that their yea was equal to our oath, and that we should not press the matter unless we were willing to confess that it was just

for Papists to compel us to a divine service which was against our conscience."[1] In the following year, lifting up his voice in behalf of the Anabaptists of Middleburg, the prince "reminded the magistrates of that city that these peaceful burghers were always perfectly willing to bear their part in all common burdens, that their word was as good as their oath, and that as to the matter of military service, although their principles forbade them to bear arms, they had ever been ready to provide and pay for substitutes. We declare to you, therefore," said he, "that you have no right to trouble yourselves with any man's conscience, so long as nothing is done to cause private harm or public scandal. We therefore expressly ordain that you desist from molesting these Baptists, from offering hindrance to their handicraft and daily trade, by which they can earn bread for their wives and children, and that you permit them henceforth to open their shops, and to do their work, according to the custom of former days."[2] The Baptist principle of soul liberty now soon found its way into a compact which became the foundation stone of the Netherland Republic." In 1579, Article XIII. of the Union of Utrecht, declared: "Every one shall be free in the

[1] Rise of the Dutch Republic, 3, 206.
[2] Rise of the Dutch Republic, 3, 334.

practice of his religious belief, and that in accordance with the peace of Ghent, no one shall be held or examined on account of matters of religion." In other words, as Motley says:[1] "Every man was to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience."

In securing this result, the Prince of Orange, as we have seen, was an important factor. But how came he to be the steadfast advocate of religious liberty? Doubtless, he was influenced by the circumstances in which he found himself as the leader of his countrymen in their struggle for political freedom. There were in the Netherlands different religious bodies, whose members lived in the same community. Here were Roman Catholics, here were the followers of Luther and Calvin, and here also were the Anabaptists. They all acknowledged one God, and were the disciples of a common Master. Why should they not have common religious rights?

It is possible that out of these circumstances the idea of religious liberty came to William of Orange. But the fact cannot be overlooked, that for a generation before the prince appeared as an advocate of the sacred rights of conscience in religious concerns, the Anabap-

[1] Rise of the Dutch Republic, 3, 415.

tists in every part of the Low Countries had asserted the great doctrine of soul liberty. Menno Simons, who united with the Anabaptists in 1537, when the Prince of Orange was only fourteen years of age, was a tireless apostle of religious liberty, and until his death in 1561, as the leader of the Anabaptist host in the Netherlands, he lifted up his voice in behalf of his persecuted brethren. Is it not possible, therefore, that this Anabaptist plea for religious freedom, often repeated and emphasized in many ways, reached the ear of William, and awakened in his freedom-loving soul a heart-felt response? Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise. At all events, if the first suggestion of the idea of religious liberty did not come to him from this source, his position was confirmed by the positions of these persecuted Anabaptists. The record shows that they implored his aid, and because they were faithful to him, he was faithful to them, and insisted that they should have the same religious privileges as were granted to men of other creeds.

ANABAPTISTS IN ENGLAND.

But the influence of these Netherland Anabaptists in advocating religious liberty was even more widely felt. The persecutions which they endured in their own country compelled many of them to seek an asylum in England. When Philip II., of

Spain, in 1567, sent the infamous Alva into the Low Countries the exodus commenced.[1]

Across the North Sea and the English Channel they made their way, Dutch and Flemish weavers, farmers, brickmakers, artisans of every kind, a hundred thousand it is said, and settled in the eastern and southern counties of England. "The direct influence of these refugees on the English people was seen in this—that each foreign workman was compelled by law to take and train one English apprentice. This law sent probably fifty thousand English boys and young men to school, not only in industry, but in republican ideas and liberal notions. These refugees, as English historians ac-

[1] Since this paper was prepared, Harper & Brothers, New York, have published in two volumes "The Puritan in Holland, England, and America: an Introduction to American History," by Douglas Campbell, A. M., LL. D. It is a valuable contribution to our information concerning the beginnings of English life on these Western shores. Referring to the influence of the Netherland Anabaptists in England, he says: "When Alva began his rule in the Netherlands, in 1567, their exodus to England opened again (some had taken refuge in England during the persecutions under Charles V), and on a large scale. They were industrious and moral, and as good mechanics would have been welcomed by the government. But, although received and given shelter, they excited the indignation of the English prelates by their heretical doctrines, insisting on the necessity of adult baptism, and declaring that the Saviour died for the redemption of all mankind, and not for that of a select few. Two of them, as we have already seen, were for these heresies burned at the stake so late as 1575, by order of the queen. But apart from these heresies, they proclaimed another doctrine still more monstrous in the eyes of a monarch like Elizabeth. Turning for their religion to the Sermon on the Mount, they taught that all oaths, courts of justice, and officers of magistracy were unchristian, and, above all, that the civil government had no concern with religious matters. Here, for the first time, the doctrine of a separation between Church and State was proclaimed on British soil." Vol. II., pp. 178, 179.

knowledge, achieved the industrial revolution of England. They laid the foundations of that commercial and manufacturing supremacy of Great Britain which is today the envy and wonder of the world, and which has changed the character of the islanders from that of shepherds and agriculturists to that of machinists and manufacturers, and which has made England the richest country in the world."[1] But they did more. Among these refugees were thousands of Anabaptists. "All through Suffolk and Norfolk, and especially right in Norwich, where Browne—the leader of the independent movement in England—lived and taught, were Dutch Anabaptists. . . . Each congregation of the Dutch Anabaptists and Mennonites was a distinct church, a republic of itself, holding, besides many things we do not hold, substantially to the same order as that of the

[1] The Influence of the Netherlands, page 10, Rev. W. E. Griffis, D. D. The United States is now undoubtedly the richest country in the world. From the census office in Washington I have received the following statement: "This office has no official estimate of the wealth of Great Britain. In a series of essays, however, on the growth of capital in that country, written by Robert Giffin, and published in 1889, the wealth of Great Britain, after evidently a laborious and careful investigation based mainly upon the returns of income for taxation, is placed at £10,037,436,000 sterling, or say $50,000,000,000. It will be seen by bulletin No. 192, issued by this office, that the wealth of the United States, assuming the relation between the true and assessed value should prove to be the same in 1890 that it was in 1880, would be about $63,000,000,000. The figures in both cases are necessarily made up largely of approximations and estimates, but there is no reason to suppose but that the wealth of this country is considerably in excess of that of Great Britain, and increasing every year at a greater ratio."

Baptists and Congregationalists of to-day. They had so held these principles before Brown was born. Living in England, where the Established Church was all-powerful, they paid their taxes, furnished substitutes for military service, but kept intact their ideas of religious liberty."[1]

These are not my own words. I am quoting from a paper recently read before the Congregational Club, in Boston, by Rev. William Elliot Griffis, D. D., a Boston Congregational clergyman. He shows farther, how persecution assailed these Anabaptist exiles in England. Their ears were cropped, their noses were sliced, and they were burned at the stake. The independents suffered also; and when at length a company of English Brownists at Gainsborough and Scrooby found it necessary to seek an asylum elsewhere, they made their way to Holland, where now, as they heard, was "freedom of religion for all men."[2] Heard how? From the Ana-

[1] The Influence of the Netherlands, p. 15.

[2] "We have seen . . . what a close resemblance existed between the principles advanced by the English Separatists and those held long before by the Anabaptists, or Mennonites, of Holland. When now these Separatists were driven from their homes to find a refuge in Holland, it was but natural that they should be attracted by the teachings of men to whom they owed so much. The city of Amsterdam became the headquarters of the English refugees, and here they found great numbers of the Mennonites. Distracted in their own congregations, some of the English Separatists left their brethren, accepted a new baptism at the hand of the Mennonites, and openly avowed many of their doctrines. The new converts took for themselves the name of Baptists, and in 1611 a number of them returned to England, and founded in London the first church of 'General

baptists by whom they were surrounded, and who had learned of the better days that had come to their fatherland.

THE TRAINING OF THE PILGRIMS.

And so the Pilgrims had eleven years of training in Holland, before they turned their faces toward these New England shores. And when at length they came hither, they came "full of charity, kindliness, and toleration, their minds broadened by experience in a land where religion was free to all men," and as a result, "their treatment of Roger Williams, the Radical, and Miles Standish, the Roman Catholic, was in marked contrast to that which men who differed in convictions received from the Puritan immigrants."[1] Indeed, Dr. Griffis suggests[2] that there is a possibility that Roger Williams derived his great doctrine of soul liberty from these Dutch Anabaptists. "He studied and preached in the region of England overrun" by them; and from one of

Baptists.' By 1623, they had churches, corresponding with what were known as the Waterlander Mennonites of Amsterdam, in London, Lincoln, Sarum, Coventry, and Tiverton. Thus it came about that the persecuted Anabaptists of Holland, taking their doctrines from the early Christians, gave birth to the powerful denomination of Baptists, which has played so important a part in the religious history of England and America. . . . The Congregationalists, or Brownists, supported them in demanding religious liberty, but it is to the honor of the Baptists that they were the first body of English Christians to formulate and enforce the doctrine." Campbell, "The Puritan in Holland, England, and America: an Introduction to American History."

[1] The Influence of the Netherlands, p. 34.

[2] The Influence of the Netherlands, p. 35.

his letters to John Winthrop, [1] we learn that he was so familiar with the Dutch language that he read it to the poet John Milton.

The late Rev. S. L. Caldwell, D. D., in his preface to Roger Williams' "Bloudy Tenent of Persecution," refers to three tracts on liberty of conscience and persecution published between 1614 and 1661, and says: "They were the earliest cries of the Word, whose line has gone out through all the earth, and its words to the end of the world." [2] So it seemed when Dr. Caldwell wrote these words; but the study which in recent years has been given to the Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century has made us familiar with earlier cries of that same voice, for which the world had waited so long.

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[1] Publications of the Narragansett Club, Vol. VI. pp. 261, 262.

[2] Publications of the Narragansett Club, Vol. III. p. 11.

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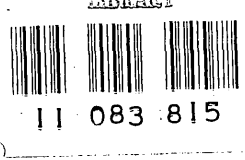

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